

# Place Making Journey: Transition in urban public open spaces from Ancient to Modern Age

Seemantini Soraganvi\*

SMAID Architecture College, Anand, Gujarat State, India

## Abstract

*Urban planning and design has proven to be an important element in shaping life styles, solving problems and giving new ways of living in the urban arena. The quality of urban life is one of the big goals that the field tries to reach. Urban open spaces are known to enhance the quality of urban life. So, every city needs these spaces. The planning and design of urban open spaces have been practiced in different parts of the world in different ways. The practice and use of these spaces differed from place to place as well as from time to time. A good approach in the planning and designing of these spaces is to first study the past and current trends of urban open space usage in a place. The paper covers a general history and development of urban Square from Ancient to Modern Age and tries to demonstrate transition occurred in design. The development and current use of this space will indicate the direction of urban open space trends in the city. This will in turn help the future approaches in planning and design of such spaces. So, the paper includes the sustainable approaches for design of urban squares for better community interaction in urban life.*

**Keywords:** Urban Square, study, past and current trends, transition sustainable approaches

## 1.0 Introduction

The effects of fast changing economic and social conditions have increasingly become significant on how people use and shape their environments. The urban population has been dramatically increasing worldwide and consequently physical structure of the cities changes constantly, mostly in negative ways. As the population increases, the demand for infrastructure and facilities also increases. Privatization and decentralization are the two major concerns on the future of the cities and open public spaces.

Public squares are one of the significant public spaces in an urban environment. Urban squares are open public spaces which reflect the cities' identity and the communities' cultural background. They are where people of the community gather and "urban life" takes place since the ancient times. As the fundamental component of the city structure, urban squares contribute to the image and prestige of the city. According to Levy (2012), Public Square is that "on a square, citizens are not connected to manifestations of nature, but to the heart of urban

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\*Corresponding Author: Seemantini Soraganvi; E-mail- seema\_sorganvi@yahoo.com

culture, history and memory". In the last few decades, many urban squares have lost their function and role due to the changes in use of public spaces. Hence, designing urban squares as both public and open spaces now require more importance and attention. Designing urban squares should be a part of urban design. Otherwise they become disconnected and meaningless, rather than being an integral part of the city.

In this Research paper Author used the word place making, "Place making is not just the act of building or fixing up a space, but a holistic approach to creating vital public destinations that promotes community commitment and involvement"<sup>1</sup>. The place making journey which I mean to express here is, I begin with world history of public squares, to understand how these spaces came to be and why they have changed. Then analyzes the transition in public square Piazza Navona, a city square in Rome, Italy. The study starts with the historic reconstruction of the square evolution. Concentrating on the events that caused meaningful changes in their characteristics from the moment of their creation until the day. The selection is based on three criteria Firstly the square still exists and widely recognized as very busy and active place. Second, the square was to be located in the cities of considerable size where people are presented with a range of alternative places to visit. Third, the square should also participate in the contemporary urban fabric and network of interrelation of the city. Finally, I will discuss sustainable (Long lived) strategies for Design of squares fits for all the Squares in the World.

## 2. Historical Background of Squares

Ironically public open spaces have been considered as a powerful component of urban fabric and means of transforming communities. At first, the squares were established at the crossroads of important trade routes where exchange of goods as well as ideas took place. The principal form of these public spaces derives from the Greek agora.

The Greek 'agora' was the first urban open space typology. Democracy played an important role in shaping Greek cities. Agora was an open place in the city centre where political, social and economic activities took place. Greek agoras were public spaces for all kinds of gatherings; such as political meetings, athletic and musical games, theatre performances and commercial activities. The geometrical form of the agora was usually square or rectangle.

Similarly, the Roman Forum was a large open space where people gather for political, economic and social activities. According to Mumford (1961) the Roman forum was the combination of agora and acropolis since it included more activities (such as Designing Urban Squares 515 shrines, temples, the hall of justice and the council houses) with more formal order. Especially, during the republican period, the forum was the heart of the city. In it were located the courts, the major state temples, and the Rostra where leaders addressed the people [3].

Following the collapse of Roman Empire, basilicas were transformed into churches and both cathedrals and churches became the focus of daily life in the middle ages. Most of the open public spaces were shaped around religious buildings. During this period commercial activities took place also in public spaces [3]. Therefore in middle ages, open public spaces were used mainly for religious ceremonies, and as marketplaces. In some European countries civic squares and piazzas emerged during this period [4].

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1. [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org).

There were some apparent changes in city morphology. With the changing economical, political and philosophical perspectives, approaches to planning and design of the towns shifted with the influence of rationalization during the Renaissance. Formal designs and plans were very common in this period. Symmetry and order were the essential principles in design of the squares. Italian piazzas are the very well-known examples of the Renaissance public squares [5]. Monuments and fountains were added to the design to create aesthetically pleasant environments. Piazza Navona is a city square in Rome, Italy. It is built on the site of the Stadium of Domitian, built in 1st century AD, and follows the form of the open space of the stadium. Axial order, balance and hierarchy became main design principles during the Baroque period. In this period, open spaces were designed to create visual and ceremonial effects[6].

### 3. Squares in modern period

In 19th century, industrial revolution caused dramatic changes in urban design and planning. The establishment of broad railway networks led to population increase in urban areas which stimulated growth of cities. New industrial areas were developed near cities and labor class began to move into cities to dwell. As the bourgeoisie raised, women became more participant in the city life. The emerge of shopping arcades, shopping streets, bazaars and department stores created a new form of public space, especially for women. The changing social, economical and political structure of the city also affected city morphology[10]. Increased population meant more needs, more services and more waste. The city structure began to deteriorate. At the end of 19th century, concerns for environmental deterioration and community well-being triggered the parks movement. Instead of streets and squares, huge green areas emerged as new public places. Population increase in urban areas continued during 20th century and cities become more and more expanded, heterogeneous, and fragmented. Private automobile ownership showed a rapid increase and cities become motor vehicle dominant environments. As a result pedestrian movement and freedom were limited. In the second half of the 20th century, many urban squares turned into crossroads especially in developing countries (Figure 1). New consumer habits and trends also caused decline in open public space use. Shopping malls have become new leisure centers. At the end of the 20th century, following the spread of internet use, virtual environments appeared as new “social platforms”<sup>\*8+</sup>.



Fig 1: Kizilay square in Ankara Today



Fig 2: Kizilay square in Ankara 1940

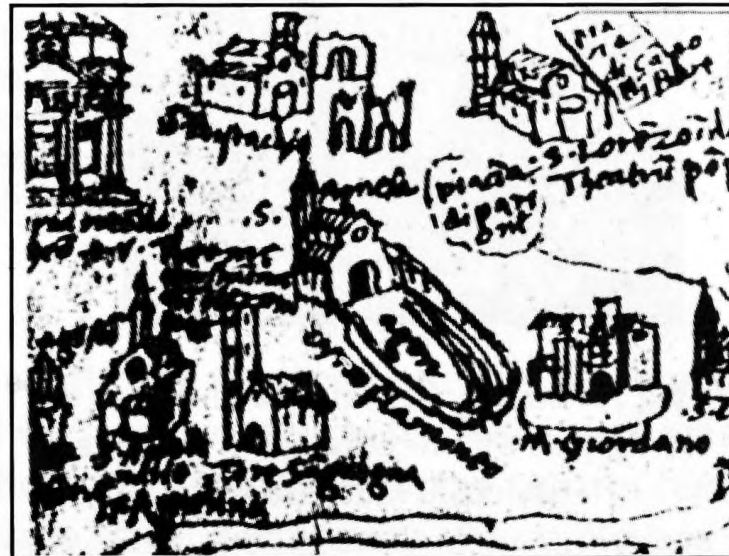
(Source: [www.sozluk.ankara](http://www.sozluk.ankara))

#### 4. Transition in Piazza Navona- City square in Rome, Italy

Renowned worldwide for its beauty and architectural integrity, the first records from the area corresponding now days to piazza Navona date from the Roman Empire. When first Caesar and then Augustus ordered the construction of a temporary wooden enclosure for the practice of sports. Under Nero it had evolved in to an amphitheatre for the celebration of a Roman tournament, similar to the Greek Olympic Games. Domiziano in 86 B.C. was responsible for the construction of the “Agoni Capitolini” (Fig 3) an enormous stadium made of marble and surrounded entirely by roads. The last mention of stadium being in good condition come from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. During all this time, the stadium had been the centre of all the great celebration of the people of the Urbe. However, with the decadence of the Roman Empire and the Barbarian invasions, the whole area was abandoned and the stadium gradually decayed into a disconnected shape of piece of marble.



**Fig 3:** “Agoni Capitolini” in Ancient Rome (Ambrogio Brambilla and Nicola Van Aelst, 1582-1599)

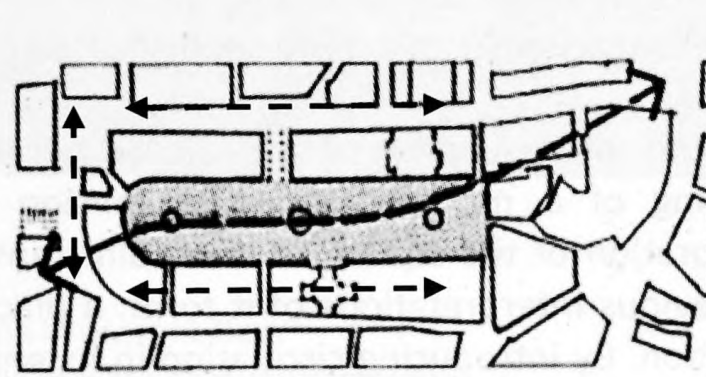


**Fig 4:** Toer and mansions of noble families around “Campus Agoni”(Aleandro trozzi,1474)

During the Medieval period the ruins, partially covered by vegetation, were called “Campus Agonis”(Fig 4). Its location midway between attracted some attention to it resulting in the construction of some Christian chapels (Fig 5). Three chapels were erected on top of ancient Roman oratories. The area was continually benefited by revitalization of the city and strengthening of the church. Its surrounding roads became more and more significant routes, until it was finally transformed in to a residential and commercial center for the nobility and cleric.



**Fig 5:** 1.-Church of S. Giacomo degli Spagnuoli.2-Palazzo Orsini .3-Church of S.Agnese (Mario Cartaro,1576)



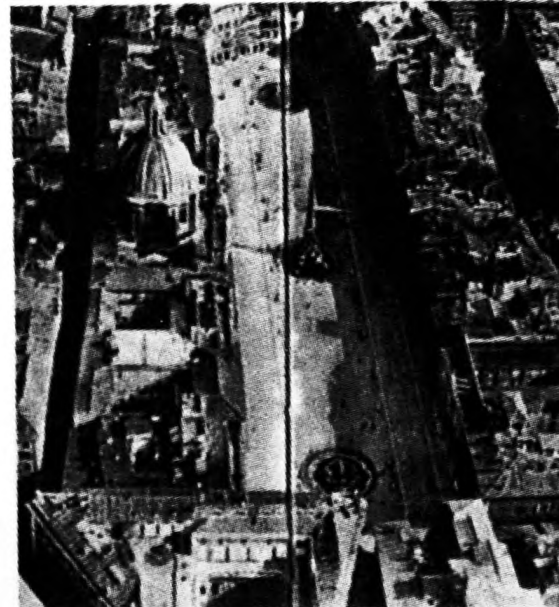
**Fig 6:** Showing Interior stadium and surrounding road 1623.

The competition among the different families for the possession of the area was responsible for the construction of palaces and towers, which gave a stronger definition to the space. However,

all the building main façade faced the outside, since the main reason for their existence was the adjacency to an important road system. The interior of the stadium remained untouched. Its elevated position in relation to the surrounding routes, as well as the permanence of significant part of the ancient wall, prevented circulation from cutting across its space (Fig 7). Finally the market was established in the internal area, which gradually assumed a stronger position in relation to the external road, Little by little the surrounding building changed the location of their door, having the main entrance through the square.



**Fig 7:** Fountain dei Fiumi and Church of Agnese with new façade in Baroque style(G.B Moore1873)



**Fig 8:** Aerial view of piazza Navona in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. G.B Moore 1873)

The preservation of the area had been threatened since 1873 by many regulatory proposals. The houses along the curved edge, requiring demolition for safety reasons, were reconstructed in the same fashion of the original ones. In the same period the two fountains were remodeled according to new aesthetic taste (Fig 7).

Within this last interpretation of its form, a new chapter in the history of piazza Navona started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This new period was marked by the transference of the main civic center of Rome to Piazza Colonna. The square was deprived of part of its meaning and use. The market alone was not able to attract people as before and maintain the traditional character of the square. It needed to be transferred to another site in order to allow the square to recuperate the original lure, and be characterized by a new image. The construction of Corso Vittorio Emanuele brought a large flux of people and traffic into adjacencies, simulating commercial activities of a more sophisticated nature.

While the interior space of the square became devoid of activities, the city experienced the beginning of a modern era of expansion and increase in traffic volume. The proposed incorporation of the square in the main transportation system of the city disregarded both of the previous interpretations of its form: a place containing activities and a place surrounded by circulation. By introducing circulation in its enclosed space the plan would probably destroy the cohesion of its form, as well as the characteristics that had supported its survival during so many centuries. The decision ultimately made to reinforce traffic along the peripheral avenue and to reserve the interior for other kind of activities respects and emphasizes the traditional patterns of use [16].

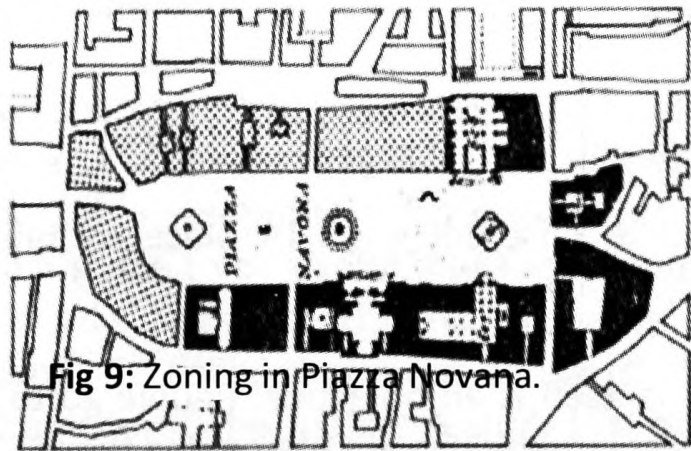


Fig 9: Zoning in Piazza Novana.

**ZONING**

■ Palaces, churches and administrative buildings  
 ▨ Commercial activities

(Source- Franco spinoshi piazza Navona,Rome 1970)

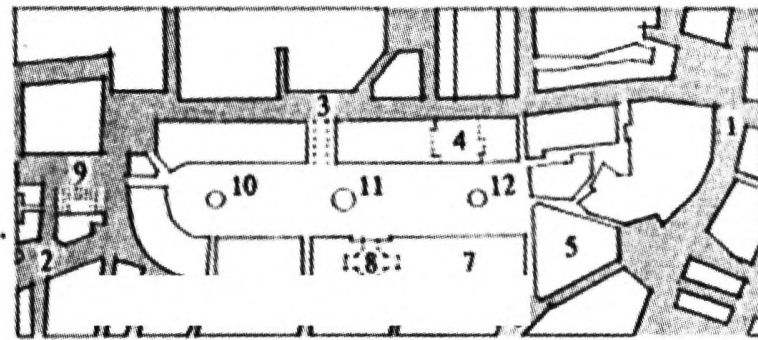


Fig 10: Plan of Piazza Novana Now

- 1) Corso Vittorio Emanuele
- 2) Via Zanardelli
- 3) Corso del Rinascimento
- 4) S. Giacomo degli Spagnuoli
- 5) Palazzo Braschi
- 6) Piazza Pasquino
- 7) Palazzo Pamphily
- 8) Church of S. Agnese
- 9) Piazza S. Apollinare
- 10) Fountain dei Calderari
- 11) Fountain dei Fiume
- 12) Fountain del Moro

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Even though in the present century, the scenery has been physically protected, the performed activities have been drastically transformed through the centuries. Religious holidays and important political and religious events were always celebrated there. Many activities have continually contributed to the unique atmosphere and reputation of the square: numerous forms of commerce, small industries, carnival parade, race, horse circus. Piazza Novana revive the color, light, movement and noise of the old times. Nevertheless, it still preserves the traditional warmth and dynamic which are expressed through activities more adequate to the modern way of life. Its various café and restaurants are a favorite place for evening social meetings, whereas its perimeter suggest a good track for the weekend jogging[19].



Fig 11: Piazza Navona in present Days

Source: <http://webs.wofford.edu/davisgr/i2006/intinerary.htm>

## **5. Findings from the Study of piazza Navona square**

The study of Piazza Novano square reveals that,

- The same form can be interpreted and used in different ways (A place containing activities, A place surrounded by circulation etc).
- Action is contained within its internal space it is itself is an objective: People go to the square with the specific purpose of joining the activities which are happening there.
- The activities enclosed by the square must be sufficiently attractive to justify the confluence of pedestrian.
- In a square neither form nor use can be pointed out separately a decisive aspect, Together they perform a very significant role: They relate to each other in a reciprocal basis: the form of a square can enhance or inhibit some type of activities (depending on its dimension, shape and degree of definition) while activities can induce major change in its physical organization.
- The relation of square with the city: Piazza Novana, for instance, during the Roman Empire was a place for celebrating important civic events. This function has been perpetuated and partially explain its transformation in the 12<sup>th</sup> century into a residential and commercial center for the nobility.
- There is an emphasis on the length of the space which is reflected in the bold, horizontal treatment of the facade.
- A public square can be dominated by a vista or void rather than a building or piece of great sculpture.

### **5. Considerations while Designing of Urban Square**

It is quite challenging to define universal design principles that would sustain for longer time and fit for all the squares in the world. On the other hand it is possible to identify some basics that would help designers and planners through the design process. Today's cities are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic more than ever. Therefore public realm is more heterogeneous today and designers and planners need to find ways to create places that serve for "everyone" in these culturally diverse communities.

Keeping in mind that today's urban environments are more complex and diverse, some sustainable design strategies which are key learning from above study for public squares are presented below.

#### **5.1 Public Realm**

Design of urban public realm involves two dimensions; functionality and visual appearance. Functionality refers to the activities and the degree of activities fitting to that place. On the other hand visual appearance is about form, image and aesthetics.

### 5.1.1 Function

Public spaces need to be accessible to all groups. People should be able to make connections between the place, their lives and the world. Vitruvius when writing about the design of the forum said it should be proportionate to the number of inhabitants, so that it may not be too small a space to be useful, nor look like a desert waste for lack of Population'\*13+. The evening parades in cities like Florence, together with the many other outdoor community activities, demand the concentration of design effort in the development of the public domain. In the centrepiece of the 'public realm', the place where the major public works, the major public expenditure and the greatest civic art is located. It is only when the main square of most old towns is reached that one has really 'arrived'; all the streets lead naturally to this focal point. Some examples are, St Peters Rome- Centre piece of public Realm, Campo, Siana, Times Square in New York city.etc which are still working and attracting many people.



**Fig 12:** Campo-Public Square in Siena showing people involvement.



**Fig 13:** Piazza del Popolo, Rome showing people involvement

(<http://www.livablecities.org/articles/european-square-conference-report>)

### 5.1.2 Form

A public squares form is influenced by the surrounding environment. Even though the word "square" points out a form itself, a public square can be in any form such as rectangle, square, circle, triangle or amorphous [Fig 14]. Despite this there are some rules that apply to most squares. The squares are always of the enclosed type. Almost always important buildings are not free standing but built into the walls of the square. Objects on the square (wells, fountains, monuments) are placed outside the main streams of movement over the squares. In towns that have grown organically squares are never geometrical [18].

- Enclosure; closed and protected space
- The centre should be free
- Monuments that are placed on the perimeter
- Existence of the elements of surprise
- Attractiveness of architectural façades
- Concavity and aesthetic pavement

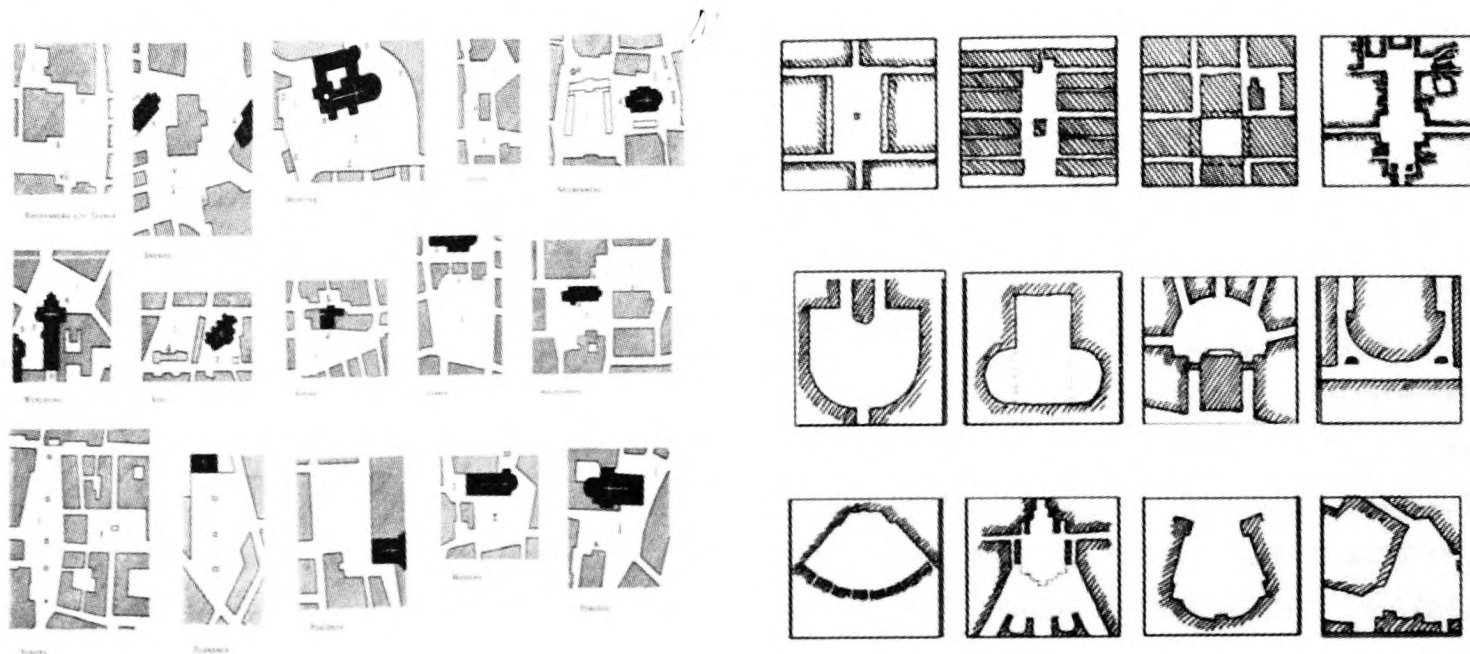


Fig 14: Different Forms of Public Squares

<http://dx.doi.org>, <http://predmet.fa.unilj.si/siwinds/s1/u2/su1/>

Zucker suggests five types of urban square forms [15]

- The closed square: it often has a regular geometric form. The only interruption to the closed.
- Square is the streets that are leading to it.
- The dominated square: the space is directed to a building or a group of buildings.
- The nuclear square: it has a central feature which creates a tension that keeps the whole together.
- Grouped squares: individual squares linked organically and/or aesthetically.
- The amorphous square: it is unorganized and formless when compared to other types.

### 5.1.3 Location and size

- The first factor to be considered in design of urban squares is the location and the size of the square. Throughout the history squares and plazas have always been at the intersection of main routes of transportation and pedestrian traffic[12].
- Since human presence and activity is the essence of public squares they should be easily accessible (both physically and visually) to public and should be created in central locations within the city.
- Decentralization is one of the problems faced in contemporary cities, which makes it difficult to select central locations, since there are too many. Therefore it should also be noted that links and connections between different squares within the city should be established in order to sustain continuity of urban form.
- Size is another aspect of urban public square design. It is often thought that public squares must be large in size. However, the size should be determined according to the location, surrounding uses, and activities nearby.
- Squares surrounded by taller and dense buildings may appear smaller than they actually are. A ratio of 1:2 and a maximum of 1.5:2 between building height and space width can be successful to create a strong sense of definition of space.
- Edges are also important in creating the sense of definition of an urban square. According to Alexander et al. (1977) "if the edge fails, then the space never becomes lively."

#### **5.1.4 Activities**

- Urban public squares are venues for various activities that help social cohesion and individual restoration.
- Generally, urban public squares are not designed to serve for any special type of activity. On the contrary they should be designed to provide opportunity for different kinds of activities at any time.
- Activities aiming to attract people should never dominate the character of the square. Besides, designers should ensure involvement and participation of all social groups within a public space.

#### **5.1.5 Landscaping**

- Generally, hard surface dominates the landscape of an urban square. Therefore selection of pavement materials is great of importance in the design phase in terms of both visual appearance and functionality.
- Various materials (e.g. stone, concrete, brick etc.) can be used in public square design. Pavement materials must be durable and aesthetically appealing.
- Focal areas can be created by changing the color, form or texture, as well as pavement material itself.
- Water surfaces are landscape elements commonly used in public squares to create a focal point or aesthetically pleasing views.
- Seats/benches, outdoor luminaries, trash bins, and direction signs are the most used site furniture items in open public spaces.

#### **5.1.6 Focal Point Elements**

Focal points elements might be useful to attract users while contributing to the square's identity and image. A focal point can be created by using any design element (e.g. water fountain) or public art works (e.g. sculptures, monuments).

### **6. Conclusion**

Today as public spaces decline, concerns for the vitality and liveability of the cities increase. People are the main ingredients of the city and without public spaces it is impossible to establish a physical and mental connection between public and urban environment. As the square constitute the public domain therefore, must be coordinated and based on perception of the people.

In this Research paper the literature study of squares from history to modern reveals that, place making act was happening from ancient times and also this study helped to understand transition occurred in design of squares. In the ancient times the squares were the heart of the city. They are not only used as a interacting places but also for multifunctional purpose as a market place, for cultural activity, as a leisure purpose and also for social gatherings slowly in modern era these squares turned in to crossroads.

The outcome by studying the transition stages of Piazza Novana reveals that, the same Form can be interpreted and used in different ways. Initial provisory enclosure for the practice of sports during the Roman period has been transformed into residential and commercial centre In the

Medieval period. In the Renaissance period Resulting construction of 3 chapels surrounding roads were developed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century peripheral roads concentrated the main uses: a connection between the city, a route for official and religious parade and central space become more dominated commercial and civic activities were developed and fountains were constructed in the central part. The process of transformation experienced by a square, which have affected use and relation to the urban environment .It exert, therefore, a direct influence on the way a square is perceived at any given period.

So finally we conclude that, the study of Piazza Novano helped us to understand, though the square exists from ancient time till at present also it maintained its character so the success of a square is just related to how it was formed, what contains it or what it contains, but also what happens within it. Looking towards modern change in squares we need to find the answer to this question is we retaining its character or expediting its decay? Its existing condition reveals that we are certainly not doing enough. A conscious effort has to be made to provide a better relationship between people and the square. Besides the literature review, I recommended some design basics in creating successful urban public squares which will help for design of urban squares for better community interaction in urban life.

“Successful urban squares are designed for people to walk in, stand in, sit in, dance in and to Perform in, and to look at other people participating in these activities”<sup>10+</sup>

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